

Article

## Emotional Interest Representation and the Politics of Risk in Child Protection

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### Abstract

This article explores the emotional dimensions of political representation by British Members of Parliament (MP) in relation to child protection. The public speech acts and first-hand accounts of three MPs are drawn upon as examples. These highlight different forms of emotional interest representation that arise following the death of a local child from severe abuse or neglect and in response to anxieties in the community about risk. Firstly, I examine the role of the MP in seeking to embody their constituency in the public expression of collective emotional responses and to defend it from feelings of guilt and shame. Personal feelings of guilt and a consciousness of the politician's role in attributing blame are then considered. Thirdly, I explore the role of the MP as trusted envoy for anxieties about risk to individual children within their constituencies. The article draws on Berezin's concept of the secure state and Hochschild's notion of politicians as feeling legislators, and is based on qualitative documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews with MPs. It is argued that the emotional processes outlined are central to understanding the problematic relationship between politics and state social work that fuels the cycle of crisis and reform in children's services in the UK.

### Keywords

child protection; emotion; Members of Parliament; representation; risk; social work

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Pitkin's classic account of political representation defines it as an *activity* that involves "the making present *in some sense* of something which is nevertheless *not* present literally or in fact" (1967, pp. 8–9, emphasis in original). Where the 'something' is a constituency of interests and concerns, this comes into being through the process of representation and is endogenous to it, rather than being necessarily formed prior to it (Disch, 2012). At the heart of Pitkin's radical account is therefore a 'constituency paradox': democratic representation must assume the existence of constituencies that in fact come into being through processes of representation (Disch, 2012). In relation to political representation by British Members of Parliament (MP), Crewe (2015) has similarly argued that their role in 'making' representation is paradoxical: "although they cannot logically both represent themselves

and embody their diverse constituency, practically speaking they do. They do not choose between these roles but accomplish them at the same time" (p. 226). In this article, I argue that emotion is key to understanding the complex and paradoxical nature of political representation, and that collective emotional responses to the deaths of children from abuse and neglect illuminate these processes particularly acutely.

In the introduction to their edited volume on the 'emotional turn' in politics and international relations, Clément and Sangar (2018) stress the importance of researchers clarifying the specific conceptualisation of emotion they adopt. The three main terms used in research—affect, emotion and feeling—are "contested and particularly fuzzy at times", and have lines between them that are porous (Clément & Sangar, p. 17). A broad analytic distinction between affect and emotion is often made. Where affect can be considered largely uncon-

scious and “circulating through people” (Reeves, 2018, p. 115), emotions are subjectively and consciously experienced and therefore easily verbally represented; whereas feelings are the conscious awareness of an emotional experience (Clément & Sangar, 2018). This article draws on the sociological tradition of regarding emotions as being both embodied, physiological experiences and also relational and social in character (Williams & Bendelow, 1998). Emotions exist in social relationships by virtue of being “part of a transaction between myself and another. The emotion is *in* the social relationship” (Barbalet, 2002, p. 4). Through conceiving of emotions as existing both within and beyond the body in cultural, institutional, and ideological realms, they can be understood as collective as well as individual phenomena that are also embedded in political institutions (Berezin, 2002).

I have previously argued that the ritual crisis–reform–crisis cycle in child protection in Britain (see background section below) is fundamentally political and is characterized by an ‘emotional politics’ that is structured in specific ways (Warner, 2014, 2015). Child protection is political because of the intimate connections that exist between wider social democratic processes and the family-state axis in which the profession of social work, often uncomfortably, resides. Social work is charged with intervening on behalf of the state to protect children while not trammelling the rights of parents, save in the most extreme cases. Child protection systems are also structured in emotional terms in relation to the symbolic, idealised figures of ‘the good parent’ and ‘the child’, both of which occupy central positions for the state. In fact, love for ‘the nation’ and love for ‘the child’ can be considered interchangeable value positions. In short, in a good society, citizens can be trusted to love and take care of their children. Crucially, this assumption of natural love between parents and their children underpins the pact made between the state and its citizens in terms of its powers to intervene. This political philosophy is directly expressed through the rule of optimism that operates in front-line social work practice: “The family will be laid open for inspection provided the state makes the best of what its agents find” (Dingwall, Eekelaar, & Murray, 1983, p. 92).

The child protection system can be regarded as the institutionalization of protective feelings towards children, where the complex and fraught realities of child abuse and neglect are lived out on a daily basis. However, at this point, it must be stressed that there are clearly contradictions in social and political responses to children’s suffering and indeed that of their families. Two of the most obvious examples are families living in poverty and children who are ‘looked after’ (i.e., in the care of the state). In each of these domains, a more ambivalent set of feelings exist compared with those identified with the iconic, idealized child. Disgust, contempt and fear characterize emotional responses to even the most vulnerable children (Ferguson, 2007). English social policy since the Tudor era has viewed vulnerable, abused children

as threats to civil order rather than as victims (Dingwall et al., 1983). The emotional politics of child protection reflects wider social structures in which emotional responses, particularly of contempt, disgust and shame, are constitutive of class relations (Warner, 2013, 2015).

Collective responses to child abuse and neglect are marked by a fundamental paradox concerned with various states of knowing and yet not knowing. In his analysis of the inquiry into the death of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié, Cooper expresses this succinctly:

At the level of both the particular case and the general responsibility, we know that terrible things are happening, but the pain of knowing is too great for us to be able to sustain our attention...we know that cases not so dissimilar to Victoria’s are being reported to the authorities on a regular basis, and yet do not become the object of public attention or political hand-wringing. (Cooper, 2005, p. 9)

The paradox of knowing/not knowing can be further understood in relation to proximity. To the extent that knowledge about abuse can be sustained at all, it is apparently imagined to exist in other places and not ‘here’ (de Baat, van der Linden, Koojiman, & Vink, 2011, p. 7). The emotional dimensions of ‘knowing/not knowing’ about child abuse and neglect relate in important ways to citizen-state relations at a deeper level than those that seem immediately obvious. In simple terms, the imagined good society or community, so often called to mind in political rhetoric, is not compatible with the reality in which children are subjected to cruelty and neglect by their own parents or carers. These dynamics may account for the intense emotional impetus behind social and political reaction to certain child deaths while others are routinely ignored.

To highlight the implications of these dynamics, I draw on two main theoretical contributions to the understanding of emotion and politics. Firstly, the concept of the secure state and communities of feeling introduced by Berezin (2002), and secondly Hochschild’s (2002) account of political leaders as ‘feeling legislators’ in their emotional reaction to crises. In applying these analytic tools to the arena of parenting, child abuse and child protection systems, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics of the crisis-reform cycle.

In her work on secure states and communities of feeling, Berezin (2002) stresses the link between trust, risk and emotion, arguing that emotions can be understood as a response to threats to security, acting as a warning when “something is in flux” (p. 47). In the modern nation state, political emotions such as loyalty and a sense of belonging constitute the secure state and are embedded within institutions such as schools and the legal system. Institutions provide a structure for expectations and adjudicate risk. Citizenship of a secure state is a felt identity as well as a legal category. Communities of feeling, in contrast, are emotional responses that lie outside institu-

tions and relate to collective action: “They bring individuals together in a bounded, usually public, space for a discrete time period to express emotional energy” (Berezin, 2002, p. 39). Communities of feeling can act to reinforce state stability or destabilize it. As Rose (1998) argues, fantasy has an important role in the secure state and the “unspoken components of social belonging” (p. 6). The state is as powerful for what it represents internally and emotionally as it is in reality, enacting “ghostly, fantasmatic, authority” (Rose, 1998, p. 9).

The death of a child from abuse and neglect represents a threat to security in at least two senses. Firstly, it challenges in profound ways our collective identification with a shared set of values as citizens and as parents—symbolic or otherwise. It produces, or intensifies, a sense in which our neighbours may not be trusted, but also begs questions about what a neighbour could or should have done to intervene ‘behind closed doors’. Secondly, such an event challenges the belief that the state can provide an effective safety net for children, undermining still further our capacity to believe in the good society. The death of a child through severe neglect and abuse is horrific, not only in its own right, but also because it “represents the collision between the fantasy of the nation as a universal safe childhood, and the rejected, abject elements that render this fantasy impossible.” (Provan, 2012, p. 186) However, threats to security are also powerfully identified with the state’s efforts to intervene in family life to protect children if its activities are deemed excessively interfering in private family life. The story of the death of a child that dominates political, media and public discourse, such as the case of Peter Connelly (Baby P) (see Warner, 2014), can therefore be understood as a crisis in which political leaders are called upon, or take it upon themselves, to speak to a complex interplay of deeply emotive issues.

According to Hochschild (2002), periods of crisis are moments when people turn to political leaders as feeling legislators in order to re-establish trust in the world around them and “for a sense that we live in an environment where things make sense.” (Hochschild, 2002, p. 121). The catastrophic nature of the terrorist attack on New York on 9/11 exposed an emotional regime, which is a structure that always exists but is seldom seen:

This emotional regime includes a set of taken-for-granted feeling rules (rules about how we imagine we should feel) and framing rules (rules about the way we should see and think). Together these rules shape how we see and feel about everyday reality. (Hochschild, 2002, p. 118)

After 9/11, Hochschild (2002) argues, new feeling rules concerning blame, fear, suspicion quickly emerged, with a new emotional stratification system in which different groups from before became targets of suspicion and fear. Hochschild’s conceptualisation of an emotional regime is helpful because it highlights the power political lead-

ers have in relation to events that evoke deep social anxieties. While national leaders have a clear role to play, so too do local political leaders when a critical event occurs in their community. However, in the supposed era of anti-politics and increased cynicism about the motivations of politicians in general, we might question how far their role as feeling legislators can be considered credible.

While cynicism about politics and politicians generally may be rife, the relationship between an MP and their constituents appears to be more resilient (Crewe, 2015). This relationship hinges, to some degree at least, on a shared sense of belonging to a specific locality and loyalty to the population within it. Survey evidence has consistently suggested that voters prefer candidates who are local to the geographical area of the constituency (Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Cowley, 2013, p. 22; Evans, Arzheimer, Campbell, & Cowley, 2017). The central place of locality in representation extends to a form of exceptionalism which is widely accepted as natural and acceptable in the House of Commons (Crewe, 2015). An MP “should be the living embodiment of the constituency”, defending and advocating for their constituency “with the ferocity of a mother protecting her offspring” (Paul Flynn, MP, as cited in Crewe, 2015, p. 84). The feelings of constituents in response to a wide range of issues are expressed through personal correspondence (increasingly through social media and email), face-to-face in MP surgeries, by word of mouth on the street, and in the local press and other media. Casework by MPs, in which they advocate on behalf of individual constituents in difficulty, has continued to expand since the rapid increase in the volume of this work in the post-war period (Gray, 2005). Far from being diminished, the role of the ‘good constituency member’, articulated in such depth by Searing (1985) more than thirty years ago, remains a vital one. Before moving on to outline the research undertaken as the basis for this article, I next provide a brief account of the nature of the cycle–reform crisis that is the focus of concern in this discussion.

## 2. Background

Social work and the child protection system in Britain have been subject to an accelerating cycle of crisis and reform since the 1970s. While most children who die from abuse and neglect do not attract significant attention, those that do can become the focus of intense political, media and public outcry that taps into a complex array of anxieties, with significant implications for the effective delivery of services. The reform phase of the cycle is characterised by a political commitment to ensure such events do not happen again. Multiple layers of reform have each held out the “false hope of eliminating risk”, reflecting unrealistic expectations of social work on the part of the media and public (Munro, 2011, p. 134).

The horrific story of the death of Baby P which emerged in late 2008 and the negative media coverage of social workers that followed reached “entirely new levels

of irrationality” (Butler & Drakeford, 2011, p. 199). Key to the story as it unfolded was the role played by political leaders, particularly David Cameron (then Leader of the Conservative Party in opposition), and the then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Ed Balls. In concert with the press, particularly *The Sun* newspaper, politicians helped mobilise specific feeling rules about the case (Warner, 2015). Compassion felt for Peter Connelly’s suffering was equated with intense anger at social workers. The front page headline of *The Sun* newspaper which read “Blood on their Hands” (The Sun, 2008) was a reference to Baby P’s social workers and their managers, rather than his mother and the two men who were directly responsible for his death. Political appeals to moral feeling in the national media invoked a powerful sense of solidarity as parents, based on rage towards social work as it embodies the state in relation to family life (Warner, 2015).

The period following the vociferous media and political reaction to the death of Baby P saw a significant rise in initial referrals and demand for care proceedings in England (Parton & Berridge, 2011). Debates in Parliament reflected the perception that thresholds for care proceedings were too high, while morale among social workers during this period reached an historically low level, signalling severe recruitment and retention issues in many departments (Parton & Berridge, 2011, p. 80). The reforms that followed were wide ranging and enacted at every level of social work practice and education. However, beyond the Baby P case, political reaction to the deaths of other children who have not come to such public prominence are also worthy of our attention. The death of Lauren Wright in 2001, for example, was significant in terms of the failed attempts by local MPs to respond to public pressure to give her case equal national prominence to that of Victoria Climbié, whose death was made the subject of a public inquiry (Laming, 2003; see Warner, 2015). One of the main aims of this article is to further develop our understanding of the relationship between an MP and their constituency, and the collective emotions that are animated in relation to child protection.

### 3. Methods

Whilst a relatively new field, research on emotions in politics and international relations has expanded at a rapid pace over the past 20 years (Clément & Sangar, 2018). Two debates have been dominant: the first is concerned with how emotion and the related concepts of affect and feeling can be defined and differentiated; the second is concerned with the processes through which emotions can be said to play a role in politics and international relations, and how these processes can be observed and reported through empirical research (Clément & Sangar, 2018). Both debates have highlighted the need for researchers to provide insight into their methodological approach, choice of method, and the specific conceptualisation of emotion they are adopting.

The findings reported in this article are based on data collected in two research projects. Firstly, a case-study design using qualitative documentary analysis of a range of types of secondary sources including newspaper articles, the Daily Hansard record of political exchanges in the House of Commons, reports of Serious Case Reviews and inquiries into child deaths, and records of court judgements. This documentary research has spanned a number of years, comprising several discrete case studies which have each had as their focus the in-depth analysis of responses to child deaths (for a detailed account of the methodological approach taken in this research, see Warner, 2015, pp. 175–179). Documents have been drawn on by other researchers in the field of emotions and politics to good effect, for example, in the analysis of shifts in foreign policy over time (Heller, 2018) and the neutralization of emotions such as compassion in military strategy (Wasinski, 2018). Several of the papers in this issue also illustrate the central place of documents and texts for the analysis of emotions, including those by Braat (2018), Koschut (2018), Palm (2018) and Sanchez (2018). Interest in documents among social scientists in general has shifted away from viewing them as inert records of events towards seeing them as situated and social products (Prior, 2003). The study of documents is therefore a route towards the study of culture “or the process and the array of objects, symbols and meanings that make up social reality shared by members of a society” (Altheide, 1996, p. 2). The documents used as the basis for the first part of the discussion in this article were part of a wider case study of reaction to the death of Khyra Ishaq in Birmingham in 2008. Relevant local and national newspaper articles were identified using simple search terms in the LexisNexis database of UK newspapers, with a range of other articles and documents identified through a process of cross-referencing.

The second research project, referred to here as the ‘MP study’, was a pilot study comprising ten semi-structured interviews with British MPs on the subject of ‘The Politics of Child Protection’. I obtained ethical approval for this research from the University of Kent’s Ethics Committee. The discussion below draws on the preliminary analysis of a sub-set of data from five of the interviews. I analysed the interview material and documents using the three-stage process of open, axial and selective coding advocated by Strauss (1987).

In the next section of the article, three examples are briefly presented to explore different dimensions of the concept of emotional interest representation. Through these three examples, a number of interrelated themes can be discerned in terms of how various intense emotions such as shame, guilt and anger attach to events surrounding the death of a child. These are observed through the voices of three different MPs, either directly as interview respondents, or indirectly through accounts in secondary sources such as local newspapers. In the first example, the name of the child, the MP and other identifying details have been used because they are in

the public domain. In the second and third examples, the names of children and other details have been withheld in order to preserve the anonymity of respondents in the MP study.

#### 4. Emotional Interest Representation in Communities of Feeling

##### 4.1. *"Everybody Has Been Touched by This"*

The High Court Family Division Judgement concerning the death of Khyra Ishaq in Birmingham alludes to the painful juxtaposition of city life and the death in isolation of a young child: "it is beyond belief that in 2008 in a bustling, energetic and modern city like Birmingham, a child of seven was withdrawn from school and thereafter kept in squalid conditions for a period of five months before finally dying of starvation" (Birmingham City Council v AG & Ors, 2009, para. 258). Khyra's death was found to have been preventable, based on the failure of the local authority to carry out checks on the family after she was withdrawn from school. Beyond this, however, it is striking how many local people came forward after Khyra's death, apparently with knowledge of the family, having had suspicions about her plight and that of her siblings, but who had felt unable to report them. In a statement following the conviction of Khyra's mother and stepfather for her manslaughter, the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board observed that the police investigation had identified at least thirty people who might have intervened: "it is alarming because it was clear to us that many people in the community had concerns but did not feel able to share them with the many agencies that are there to help" (full text reproduced in *The Guardian*, 2010). Almost exclusively, the local press reported the role played by neighbours sympathetically and in matter-of-fact terms, with an apparent reluctance to imply any blame for inaction:

Bhagu Patel, 77 of Osborne Road, which backs onto Leyton Road, said he had seen a child aged around seven sitting in an upstairs window at the back of the house around six weeks ago, staring out of the window for more than 30 minutes "in agony". "I felt very sad when I heard the news. I could have done something for the children, if they had waved I could have done something," he added. (Lillington, Authi, & Cullwick, 2008)

Despite this and many similar accounts, and in contrast to the strong criticism of the local children's services, few media sources cast moral judgement on the possible role that the local community and family might have played. One notable exception was this opinion piece in the local press:

Perhaps the time has come for Khyra's extended family and neighbours to stop casting aspersions on oth-

ers and start asking a few tough questions of themselves. Did they do enough to help? (Goldberg, 2008)

The possible barriers to sharing concerns with agencies was addressed directly by the Serious Case Review into Khyra's death by the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board. It attributes the reluctance to report concerns to the "mistrust and fragmentation of the community" and a general level of mistrust for authorities among many local people, particularly those who may have come to the UK with "damaging and frightening memories experienced elsewhere in the world" (Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board, 2010, Para. 17.1). With this vision of a fragmented community daunted by authority as the backdrop to events, it is particularly interesting to consider the reaction of the local MP, Khalid Mahmood, as voiced through the press in the immediate aftermath. In these reports, his voice is given prominence as he revisits familiar feeling rules about child deaths. The dominant feeling rule is that compassion for the suffering child must be equated with anger at services for failing her. Within this feeling rule, the community is constructed as united by the trauma it has experienced and cohesive in its compassionate response to Khyra's death. Simultaneously, the local authority is constructed as lying outside this community of feeling:

[Khalid Mahmood] added: "a huge tragedy has taken place. All of us need to get together and resolve this—it is not about them and us. Everybody has been touched by this and yet the authority seems totally heartless". (Macintyre, 2008)

In taking up his task of representing the emotional needs of his constituents and, very likely it seems, shielding them from the very real prospect of guilt, the MP had called for an inquiry into Birmingham City Council's activities, accusing them of "treating my constituents with contempt" (Chadwick, 2008). But not only is the local council blamed for the death, it also stands accused of failing to support local people in coping with their grief:

[Khalid Mahmood] said the council needed to "get together to support the people" affected by the tragedy. "People are upset and very concerned, children going to the local school will have been left upset....Nothing is being done to support them. They [the council] have let down the community." (Chadwick & Oliphant, 2008)

In this case, a robust public defence against guilt and shame is mounted by the MP on behalf of the people he represents, and in so doing, the constituency is reconstituted as cohesive, at least provisionally, by virtue of the grief that is shared. Crucially, as part of this process, the local children's services are cast as bearing all of the responsibility and excluded from the community of feeling of grief by virtue of being heartless.



#### 4.2. "Why Was I Not Aware?" Bearing Guilt and Shame, and Constituting Place

In the second example of emotional interest representation at work, the central importance of the sense of community and place is again in evidence. For this respondent in the MP study, the threat to security to her constituency not only arises from the deeply disturbing nature of the death of a local child, but more specifically from the notoriety that may attach to the community and the implications of this for its identity as a safe place:

I think that people were shocked. I think that they were angry. I think that there was a lot of disgust...a sense of the mother being weak....And maybe a sense of disbelief that it actually happened that a case that *could* have had the same kind of notoriety as a Baby P but didn't; that that happened in a small town like [name of the town], not a big metropolis of London where there are lots of anonymous blocks of flats and it might be quite easy for people to get lost. (MP54)

In this account, what is understood as being under threat is the very constitution of a 'small town' because, in a small town, no-one should be lost or hidden away and children should be protected. The community of feeling in which shame is attached to a child's death is firmly associated with the fragmented and alienated life of a city like London, or Birmingham, as in the previous example. The idea that a child could die under circumstances akin to those suffered by Baby P in London is beyond comprehension. However, the strong emotional response to the apparent failure to notice the missing child was mixed with troubled uncertainty about when an absence could necessarily be taken as a warning signal to intervene:

There was a real sense of disgust that it had happened in our community and that nobody had really known and that sense of a 'hidden child'...people hadn't seen her for a couple of weeks, well a kid could have chicken-pox and be hidden away for a couple of weeks...it's not that inconceivable. (MP54)

The MP is pinpointing here the moral dilemma for neighbours and others in terms of knowing when to report concerns, and she is specifically identifying a reason why, in this particular case, people may have legitimately thought nothing of the child's disappearance. The rule of optimism and how far trust in parents can reasonably be allowed to stretch, is here under direct scrutiny. This MP reflects on feelings of guilt that she experienced as being widely shared, but which she felt particularly sharply on a personal level:

Interviewer: Do you think people felt guilty?  
MP54: I'm sure that people would have felt guilty. I mean, I haven't had people come to me and say that, but, I mean, I feel it; I feel like why don't I know what's

going on in every single house in my constituency? Why was I not aware? If people had any concerns about the safety of the child, how come I didn't know about it? And in actual fact it's not my role necessarily to know about it...

The notion of the MP as the embodiment of their constituency is expressed here as a visceral connection to the daily lives of constituents. This respondent vividly animates the role of the MP as the figure who should be all-knowing and as the figure to whom people *might* have reported their concerns. Feelings of guilt among constituents, while not named by them explicitly to her, convey a powerful sense of an *unspoken* community of feeling of guilt that nevertheless may potentially have real political implications. One clear implication is the space that is opened up for a politician to be openly critical of the professionals that were involved with the family.

In terms of this MP's interaction with the local media, it was very different to that of the Birmingham MP in the previous example. She was conscious of what the local daily newspaper's approach to the story was likely to be and the suggestion of where blame might lie: "the only way they can continue to sell newspapers is by putting the most horrendous headlines on the front page accompanied with every sordid photograph that they can find...the more sensationalist the better". Her response to their request for comment was deliberately low key:

I kept it very short and very simple along the lines of 'yes, there's some responsibility on the local authority *but* ultimately it's a parental failing and that's who killed [child's name]. Obviously we don't want to see this happening again'....But that's the line, you know, politicians will use, 'we never want to see another child die', because we *don't* want to see another child die, but how does that get delivered in practice? (MP54)

As this MP narrated her interaction with journalists from the daily newspaper it was clear that she had needed to consciously resist and actively decline the invitation to engage in sensationalist terms with the story of what had happened. The feeling rules of compassion being equated with anger for the local authority or social workers involved gave way to an assertion that, however unpalatable, the ultimate responsibility lay with the parent. Added to this is her consciousness that the repetitious political assertion 'never again', while authentic, is nonetheless an unrealistic aspiration.

#### 4.3. 'Don't Say that I Said': Networks of Trust and Containing Anxiety

In this third example, the relationship between MPs and their constituents is explored as an important site in which the anxieties about knowing/not knowing about child abuse can be contained. In the MP study, some respondents provided accounts of the trust they felt they

had been able to mobilise in their communities. For this MP, this trust enabled constituents to share their anxieties without actively reporting the concerns to authorities, and also allowed generalized, perhaps even unspoken, anxiety to be named. Information can also be passively conveyed by constituents, such that the MP can be prompted to act on what they have heard without the constituent even being aware that they have done so. For this longstanding MP, trust has been built up over many years, often communicated between constituents via word-of-mouth: “You know, it’s not an exaggeration I hope but, you know, it is because people say, ‘Oh I’m a bit worried about this,’ and they just say, ‘Go and see [the MP]’” (MP101). This trust in the MP is the basis on which constituents will report concerns about a child, often instead of reporting them to services:

MP101: The neighbours don’t want to be identified so quite often I’m the, you know, the person who says [to services], you know, ‘This has been brought to my attention’.

Interviewer: Right. So it’s a kind of anonymity?

MP101: As well, yeah.

Interviewer: And they wouldn’t trust services to keep that?

MP101: No.

Interviewer: Do they ever tell you not to tell services?

MP101: Yes, all the time....regularly...‘Don’t say that I said’

This exchange illustrates well the fact that the proximity that can afford intimate knowledge of a neighbouring family’s troubles also increases the likelihood of individuals being identified if they report their concerns, with the possible repercussions that might ensue. In emotional terms, those who are close enough to have concerns about a family are also the ones who will carry the most anxiety about whether or not to let someone else know. As well as the anxiety about the child, and what may happen if no-one intervenes, there are real anxieties about the possible adverse consequences of making a report. One is the anxiety about being named as the source of a report to social services, with all the distress and anger that might well result. The insecurities about state intervention and the mistrust for authority that apparently characterized the community in the first example in this article above are therefore similarly identified by this MP. But in this case, his role in emotional interest representation is to contain the anxiety of those constituents who share concerns with him by acting as a conduit to services. By telling their MP, the delicate balance of community relations at street-level can be maintained. Through this MP’s account, the expectation of the MP in the second example given above, “to know what’s going on in every single house in my constituency”, however unrealistic in reality, has a fresh resonance.

The idea of the hidden child is starkly apparent in this MP’s account of his surgery work. He describes how a

concern about a child can be buried or implicit in a discussion about other issues, and this ‘knowing/not knowing’ has to then be actively processed by pursuing in concrete and specific terms the concern that has merely been floated as an aside:

There can be concerns about child protection at times and even this can be at a tangent from what that person that’s come to see you about, your alarm bells go up and maybe I’m more attuned to it because I went through the whole thing with [local child who died], but I always make sure we ask the right questions and go to the right people to say: ‘this has been raised with me and I’m concerned. What’s the background here? Are you aware of this family? Are you aware of this child?’ Because if you don’t you could have been the last person to have had an opportunity to be the advocate for that...child”. (MP101)

The task of emotional interest representation for this MP is to take generalized anxiety and ensure that the otherwise hidden child is made visible to those that can be directly mobilized to intervene. His acute awareness that he may be a final link to the safety net for a child at risk is plainly activated by the memory of a child’s death in the constituency, even though it predated his term as an MP. This case received wide-scale national attention and became the focus of a public inquiry. In this third example, the task of emotional interest representation in terms of managing anxiety about risk is deeply embedded in the relationships that are the bedrock of this MP’s constituency work.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has identified how politicians, simultaneously in speaking for themselves and embodying their constituencies, undertake forms of interest representation that are defined by collective emotional responses to the death of a child and anxieties about risk. Their role is in simultaneously standing *with* and standing *for* their constituents in the face of powerful emotions and moral dilemmas. In these concluding comments, attention is given to how the three examples of emotional interest representation discussed in the article may add to our understanding of the problematic relationship between politics and state social work in the UK.

The theme of the hidden child and knowing/not knowing about child abuse and risk was a central one in all three examples explored. The prospect of a child that is hidden, unnoticed, and subjected to horrific abuse and neglect at home behind closed doors arguably represents a society that is broken and is therefore a disturbing prospect for its citizens. Yet investigating suspicions of child abuse and neglect conjures up the prospect of the excessively interfering state that breaches parental rights and invades private family life without good cause. In the first example in the article, concerning the death of Khyra

Ishaq in Birmingham, the appeal to community by the local MP is paradoxically made in the midst of the growing public awareness that many local people did 'know' something of what was happening to her, yet Khyra remained a child hidden in plain sight for some five months until her death. The community that is constituted by the voice of the MP in the local press is subject to a form of 'protective scapegoating'. It is spared scrutiny over its failure to act and instead the relatively safe site for criticism—the local authority—is the focus.

In the second example, the dilemma of when to regard a child as being missing from view and thereby potentially at risk is alluded to. But the dominant focus is on the guilt that the MP feels had circulated the local community following the child's death. She embodies this guilt as the person who should be all-knowing about risk, as well as voicing her perception of the wider collective emotional response. This greater willingness to consider some degree of community responsibility may go some way to explaining her more measured response to the local media's invitation to call for 'heads must roll'. The perception of a community that is smaller and more cohesive may have diminished the sense in which a 'protective scapegoat' was needed. The MP publicly rejects the feeling rule that compassion for the child must inevitably entail blaming the local authority. She refocuses attention on parental responsibility, designating the individuals concerned *as subjects* who therefore had agency for their actions. In taking this step, the feeling rule that compassion for the death of a child *must inevitably* entail anger at the social workers or local authority involved is suspended. As feeling legislator, the stance she adopts is to assert the reality that, however unpalatable it may be, sometimes parents kill their children and it cannot always be prevented.

The MP in the third example positions himself as mediator between constituents and the state, where they are unwilling to voice their concerns directly. His role is also as protector, this time protecting constituents from the anxiety associated with knowing a child may be at risk and a family may be in trouble, but too fearful and mistrustful of state authorities to report it directly. The state that is mistrusted and is potentially daunting in its power to intervene in this example was represented in the first example as a key factor in the failure of local people to report their concerns about Khyra Ishaq.

The concept of the secure state facilitates a clearer understanding of why, in the political feeling rules following a child's death, the parents/carers can be less the focus of blame than local authorities and social workers. The idea of the parent who directly subjects their child to extreme abuse and neglect, or who, particularly in the case of mothers, allows someone else to, represent so profound a threat to the concept of a good society that their subjective status as people cannot be defended. Questions in public discourse about why they acted as they did are ultimately rendered as being a road to despair, since such questions can never be satisfactorily

answered. In the sense that their actions are represented as being beyond belief and comprehension, they are cast outside the community entirely and designated an objective status within the criminal justice system—often as evil and objects of disgust. Within a moral designation such as evil, in which basic humanity is denied, the degree to which an individual truly has agency is also implicitly, if not explicitly, denied. Under these conditions, it is to *state* agencies—those that have powers to intervene—that critical attention inevitably turns. State agencies, however apparently incompetent and impotent in the face of evil, ultimately offer hope that 'this child's death may be the last' if they can only 'learn the lessons' from the perpetual processes of inquiry and case review. This is why, in terms of policy-making in child protection, the focus is on persistently building ever more robust systems and processes of risk detection in the vain hope that risk can be removed altogether. Ultimately, the potential for a changed dynamic between social work and the political sphere hinges on a deeper understanding of the dynamics that drive political responses to critical events, and specific forms of emotional interest representation such as those outlined here.

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